

TRAINING WITH



BRUCE LEE

Student and Friend Daniel Lee Discusses His Days With the "Little Dragon"

Interview conducted
by Marian K. Stricker

Daniel Lee embodied the serenity of the martial arts. Quick to smile, quick to quote a Chinese proverb, he can just as quickly fend off an attack with smooth, lethal strokes.

Widely respected as one of Bruce Lee's original students, Daniel Lee talks here about his early training, his admiration for jeet kune do's founder, and his belief that Lee ignored some of his own principles to his detriment.

Former president of the National Tai Chi Chuan Association, Lee also discusses why he turned his emphasis to tai chi, how the style adds to jeet kune do, and why the two complement, rather than contradict each other. His philosophies give great insight into a man who seeks to meld body and spirit.

BLACK BELT: How did you first get involved in the martial arts?

DANIEL LEE: When I was 12 years old in Shanghai, China, I was beaten up by two 18-year-old Russian boys for no reason at all. They took my bicycle, and I was totally defenseless. So I decided that I must learn to protect myself. There weren't too many martial arts teachers around, so I had to take boxing. One day I met those two Russian guys again, and said "Let's be civilized, let's put the gloves on." And just with my limited training I was able to defend myself. My coach saw a lot of determination in me, and began to train me to participate in a local tournament. I did quite well, and to make a long story short, in 1948 I represented Shanghai and won the national



Bruce Lee (barechested) and his 1949 Los Angeles class, including: Dan Lee (kneeling, left); Dan Inosanto (arms folded); Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (center, back); and Larry Hartsell (fourth from right).

boxing tournament, the equivalent of the Golden Gloves.

BB: So at that point your interest was in tournaments?

LEE: I became interested in the art of fighting. Boxing is actually a very sophisti-

cated fighting art. I did run across people who were doing the slow tai chi in the park. I didn't pay much attention to it, and one of my Chinese boxing coaches said "That's something you should take up when you're ready for it." So that

was imprinted on my mind. My impression was, it's very slow, for older people.

BB: Had you started investigating the philosophies of the martial art at this point?

LEE: No, but after I graduated from college in the



Daniel Lee gets a lesson in "sticky hands" from a blindfolded Bruce. Lee says the Little Dragon had "so much capability that we stood in awe."

Daniel Lee contrasts tai chi's and jeet kune do's defenses against a right punch. Demonstrating tai chi's lotus kick, Lee approaches (1) assistant Dan Stanfill with fingers extended and prepares (2) for his opponent's punch. As the punch is thrown, Lee pushes (3) Stanfill's arm to the side while shifting his weight to the back leg, and kicks (4) the opponent's side with the side of his foot. Using jeet kune do, Lee faces (1a) the opponent with raised fists and deflects (2a) a punch with his arm while shifting his weight to the outside leg. Lee then leans (3a) to the side and delivers (4a) a kick to the opponent's side with the bottom of his foot.



U.S. I began looking at some of these Asian martial arts. I ran into Ed Parker in 1956, and he was starting a class in kenpo karate. It was supposed to be a system with a lot of Chinese influence. It was when I was earning my black belt that my immediate instructor under Parker, Danny Inosanto, recommended me to Bruce Lee, who just happened to start a school at that time in Los Angeles.

BB: Were you interested in switching from kenpo to

jeet kune do?

LEE: Well, I was impressed with Bruce. When he explained things he used all the Oriental philosophies in describing his techniques. He said that all the fixed patterns made you fight more rigidly. One has to learn to empty himself, and not be confined to a fixed routine. That was intriguing, because I was working very much on the fixed routine. I felt very comfortable with it. With Bruce's ability to demonstrate what he was talking

about, it was very attractive to me.

BB: When were you first introduced to Bruce?

LEE: It was in 1967 that I was admitted to Bruce Lee's school. Danny Inosanto introduced me to Bruce, and on the first impression Bruce was kind of cautious about who I was. But after I talked to him and mentioned my interest and background in boxing, judo, and kenpo karate, he was really interested in having me, because he liked to teach students who

had some training already. That way, whoever studied with him could really be enlightened by the Bruce Lee approach to the martial arts, as opposed to an uninitiated person who might just say "So what?"

BB: What was your initial training with Bruce like?

LEE: It was very rugged. He was selecting students carefully. He considered people who had a good attitude and were willing to train, sincere. It was not a commercial school. He only wanted people who were

Daniel Lee demonstrates the similarities between tai chi's and jeet kune do's defenses against a side kick. First demonstrating tai chi's "cloud hand" posture, Lee faces (1) the assailant with open hands, prepares (2) for the kick, catches (3) the opponent's foot in the crook of his elbow, and pushes (4) the assailant off balance. The jeet kune do defense begins with the hands raised (1a) and the fingers bent. Lee prepares (2a) for the kick and traps (3a) the foot as in tai chi, but then completes the move by kicking (4a) the back of the opponent's thigh.





recommended. We had a very good-sized group that started with him.

BB: How many?

LEE: I'd say 40. For almost two months we were doing almost nothing but physical fitness programs: jumping rope, push-ups and all that. A lot of people complained; they wanted to fight, and Bruce was just giving them the basic training. The training was so rugged that quite a few people dropped out. It was then that Bruce began the serious training.

BB: Was it his intent to weed out some people?

LEE: Definitely. That was a typical Chinese way of testing a person's dedication and persistence. Also, there had to be some sort of rapport with him. If you were becoming a little cocky, if you thought you knew everything, Bruce might not particularly like to have you in his class.

BB: Once you started the actual fighting instruction, what sort of new techniques did he show you?

LEE: It turned out I had to

forget about all I had learned, because what I'd learned was a fixed routine, and I felt secure in that. Bruce said "You have to liberate yourself from those fixed patterns. Fighting is totally in the realm of the unexpected. If you have fixed routines, you may not be able to face the real fighting situation." That was a very difficult break. All the things that you've learned become almost an instinctive movement and you had to break that habit and respond to every change in a



situation. Bruce emphasized the physical training. He said you had to sharpen the tools just like a carpenter. A martial artist's tool is his body, and he has to be able to hit at any angle, with any rhythm, any time.

BB: Were there sparring drills?

LEE: Yes, but in the way he presented them, they really opened your mind. Bruce said "You have to understand what you're doing. Don't just blindly follow and think this is it. Feel every situation, and fit into it." Later on, with my tai chi training, I realized that same thing.

BB: Did he incorporate a lot of philosophy into his training?

LEE: All his training was based on philosophy; behind it was the yin and yang principle, which Bruce very much emphasized. He didn't consider that there was such a thing as a "hard" style or a "soft" style. The yin and yang is a totality. If you label yourself, you cling to only one half.

BB: What other drills did you do?

LEE: We would do some kicking and punching, not as drills, but responding to the movement of the situation. Bruce emphasized a broken rhythm, so we practiced kicking or punching to whatever pace our partner used. We learned to fit into the space.

BB: What was Bruce like out of class?

LEE: In a class situation he was very serious. He was the teacher and he demanded total attention. You could ask questions pertaining to the subject matter, but no joking around and talking to each other, because he felt like he had so much to offer. When class was over, however, we became like friends, not just to me but to everybody. He'd tell us the latest joke he'd heard, and some were pretty



colorful jokes. He was like a brother. He was always the center of attention. Whatever he said, everybody stopped to listen. Even if it was a joke you had heard, the way he told it was so theatrical, it seemed new. People liked his straightforwardness too. If he liked you, or if something wasn't right, he'd tell you right off the bat. He'd see your kicks and tell you he had a better way to do it. It's a shedding process, getting rid of un-essentials. He had so much capability that we stood in awe. Just to see his small frame generate so much power, to see that human potential; we felt that while we were only 30-percent efficient, he was 90-percent efficient.

BB: Some people feel he was arrogant.

LEE: It depended on who he was dealing with. He had good instincts, and if he ran across some martial artist who wanted to show he was the best, Bruce would demonstrate that he was better. My relationship with Bruce was one of friend and teacher, so he was always sincere with me. He was so dedicated that he gave each student

Defending against a left punch, Lee begins the tai chi "pull-back and press" maneuver by grabbing (1) the assailant's wrist and pulling him forward. He then places (2) his hands together on the assailant's upper arm, pressing him away and off balance (3). Using jeet kune do in the same situation, Lee faces (1a) the assailant with raised fists, grabs (2a) his wrist, then delivers (3a) a blow to the opponent's face with his free hand.

supplemental training sheets tailored to our shortcomings. As he observed us, he saw just what we needed to do to overcome our obstacles. He was very much a one-to-one teacher.

BB: Was he too impatient at times?

LEE: With his ability, he felt people should be able to accomplish anything if they put enough effort into it. I don't think he showed any impatience with others, but he was impatient with himself.

BB: Did you and Bruce ever discuss the virtues of tai chi training?

LEE: Bruce said he adapted all the good parts into a whole. He took everything that was valuable for his own training. My impression was that he would explore tai chi further when he finished his movie career. At that time, there was so much more going on.

BB: What aspects of tai chi

did he use?

LEE: He knew the yin and yang principles, and realized the interplay of these two energies. If you put that much energy in terms of activity, you must also give time to repose, to relax. I felt that if Bruce could just slow down, he wouldn't burn out. He had so much drive. You have to have both, the work and the rest. He put too much emphasis on the one side, and neglected the other. He knew it, but the pressure of making a film, and the heavy schedule of training were too much. His friends heard that he was constantly losing weight, getting thinner and thinner, and we were all very concerned.

BB: In what ways does he still affect your life today?

LEE: I'm very inspired by his dedication. I saw Bruce before he was in the limelight, and the preparation he made to get ready for his opportunity was very in-

spiring. He had a very disciplined training schedule of over eight hours a day.

BB: Does it surprise you that he's still remembered so strongly today?

LEE: No, I'm not surprised at all. Beyond his physical powers, there's that intense spirit, his philosophy, and a certain charisma that other martial artists don't have. A lot of people try to fit in his shoes, but he's left a permanent imprint on the martial arts.

BB: What attracted you to tai chi?

LEE: The tai chi form is more or less a means to an end, to help you understand how the body moves to maintain relaxation and balance. The slow rhythm of tai chi offers a sense of tranquility, of meditation. Tai chi is a martial art also. Working with Bruce, I began to see the similarity between tai chi and jeet kune do. The principles behind them are the same.

BB: What principles are shared by tai chi and jeet kune do?

LEE: Bruce told us about the three methods of training. First is to learn the principle. He didn't say to learn techniques, but to

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BRUCE LEE

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learn about the body mechanics, the balance and so on. Then he said to keep the principles, which involved the second stage of training: practicing with understanding. In all martial arts I see people who practice without understanding, and that is meaningless. In the third stage,

ing?

LEE: In tai chi training I learn to find harmony within myself. In my class, I am able not just to talk about fighting, but to help people understand these principles through practicing the movement.

BB: Do you feel that was missing in jeet kune do?

"Tai chi is pliable, like a reed waving in the wind. It's not soft like a doormat people step on."

you dissolve the principle, until you aren't even aware of it anymore. That's the final stage of any art. Bruce used to say "If you know the roots, you understand the flower."

BB: How do you use those concepts in tai chi training?

LEE: No, but jeet kune do is the application of it. You can learn the techniques, but if you don't have peace within yourself, you have a lot of hostility within you. I have those hostilities, but through my training in tai chi it makes me much



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more at peace with myself. Even if I learned jeet kune do, and I enjoyed the strategy and technique and was fascinated by it, I don't have the angry attitude to try to punish somebody with what I learned.

BB: People who practice jeet kune do sometimes have a reputation for being rebellious. Do you think that's valid?

LEE: It's individual. Each person will pursue his own way. So even though I prac-

a reed waving in the wind. It's not soft like a doormat people step on.


BB: Have you continued your jeet kune do training?
LEE: I don't think I ever stopped. Bruce said "My movement is like an echo to your sound." Through my tai chi training I knew better what Bruce Lee was talking about. Tai chi is the yin responding to the forces. These forces make jeet kune do even more complete. I went from a

"I haven't stopped jeet kune do. I feel I'm exploring the yin and yang aspect even more thoroughly."

tice jeet kune do, and it's a very deadly art, I develop control.

BB: Many people think of tai chi as just a soft style. Is there more to it than that?

LEE: The word "soft" is a label. Tai chi is pliable, like

hard attack attitude to listening to a person's energy and movement, and fitting in. I haven't stopped jeet kune do. I feel I'm exploring the yin and yang aspect even more thoroughly. I think that Bruce would be very proud of my pursuit. 

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